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Despite obstacles,

James Hearst makes his life bloom

By SCOTT CAWELTI

From my years as a music student, years that now seem tacked-on like an old spare room, a few rare performances still haunt me. From memory, the words of one in particular come back:

"Sing of a time when blind with rainbows,

And torn by our need to flower, we come,

Thrusting our way toward life;

Our voices mount on the beat of the sun's great drum!

His road is hard who sees how patient earth

Cracks and strains to bring a flower to bloom..."

"Blind with Rainbows," with full chorus and orchestra, was first performed in 1962 to dedicate the music building at the University of Northern Iowa. It gave me a spine's-length of shivers. That was my first contact with Jim Hearst's work. Some six years later, I took his course "Frost, Eliot and Yeats" as a graduate student, and felt enthralled by this man's natural gifts as a teacher.

For the past 12 years as Jim Hearst's colleague, our paths have seldom crossed, but I continue to admire both the man and his poetry. Last fall, "Blind with Rainbows" was performed again, this time as a community celebration of Jim Hearst's lifelong gifts of poetry and shared insights.

Now Jim Hearst's autobiography, "My Shadow Below Me," just published by ISU Press, gives us a life filled with so much pain that the reader can't help but set it aside at times just to wipe the eyes.

But make no mistake about it: they are not the tears Jim Hearst shed for himself. The one element missing in this book—thank God—is self pity.

If anyone deserves pity, self or otherwise, it would be Jim Hearst: paralyzed in a diving accident at 19, never to walk again, losing a wife and brother to cancer, losing loved ones out of meanness and hurt, spending literally years in hospitals and in physical therapy, struggling to gain

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some small control over atrophied muscles, enduring falls and muscle spasms; the list goes on.

Yet pity would demean such a life; it's the cheapest of feelings. Instead, the man's sheer will emerges, cracking and straining, thrusting its way toward life, revealing that since the most severe limits truly arise from within, so from within can they be overcome. Few lives have such severe limits imposed, yet fewer lives seem so unlimited as Jim Hearst's.

He farmed, and that means operating the tractors, plowing and harvesting, on the Maplehearst farm, for a good part of his adult life. He taught writing and literature courses at UNI for some 34 years. He traveled to Mexico, learned Spanish, and took writing courses there. He spent eight summers in Aspen, directing a writing workshop. He's filled 13 books with poetry. He fathered a daughter out of wedlock; he even pulled a political dirty trick or two, printing locally, at his own expense, a booklet entitled "Hoover's Farm Policy." (All blank pages.)

Jim Hearst is no saint. At times, he hit what he should have missed and missed what he should have hit. But that's because he tackled life head-on, just as it tackled him; he has lived his life as an experiment, no less, in overcoming limitations. It has been a life of bringing a flower to bloom, through all the pain and loss, the hurts and hurting, the guilt and anger, arriving finally at a place where he can say, "don't ask me whether life is worth living, live it and find out."

At 81, Jim Hearst lives on, torn by a need to flower, still finding out.

"My Shadow Below Me," by the way, can also be read for local color, and strikingly so; it's full of names and places, anecdotes and musings that form a tapestry of local history. Lois Sherman, Hart Madsen, Drs. Barnett and Henderson, Jesse and Fred Loomis, the Reningers, Bun Newman, and many other familiar names all play a part. It's a book to welcome the spring.

Winter Ridge Handy, that group known for its rehearsals around a woodstove on Winter Ridge Road, and for its fiercely non-punk folk music, will be making music this weekend at the Broom Factory

Come join us; bring your non-punk friends.